

RENT COMMISSION IS SENATORS' PLAN

Must Pass on Charges in District, Subcommittee Will Suggest.

FAIR PROFIT DISCUSSED

A rent commission, to pass upon all rents charged in the District of Columbia, is the remedy for the rents situation which confronts the National Capital that the members of the Senate District Subcommittee investigating profiteering have in mind, it became apparent at a hearing and conference which the committee held yesterday afternoon.

Chairman Ball of the committee revealed the plan which is under consideration during the testimony of Bates Warren, who is a member of the local Real Estate Brokers' Association. It had been stated that the committee would hold no further hearings, but would get down to work on the draft of a bill to curb profiteering in rents immediately.

Percy H. Russell, owner of the Newport apartment house, and Bates Warren were put on the stand yesterday afternoon and questioned by members of the committee regarding the percentage of profits which owners of property should be allowed to make when renting their houses and apartments.

May Finish Draft This Week.

The hearings yesterday were the last to be given on the rent situation, and the committee expects to finish the draft of its bill by the end of the present week.

While Senator Ball discussed the advisability of the establishment of a commission of four to administer rents, with the District assessor as one of the members, it is known that other members of the committee feel that it would perhaps be more practical to have one man as rent administrator, instead of a commission.

The opinion was expressed by Mr. Warren that if Congress would let the situation alone, the law of supply and demand would quickly bring about a solution of the present rent problem. He said that owners of real estate and builders now are hesitating because they do not know what treatment to expect from Congress. The Sausbury resolution he characterized as a great mistake, which had caused stagnation in the building world here, resulting in a failure to produce the dwellings which are vitally needed.

However, if there is to be legislation dealing with rents, Mr. Warren expressed the opinion that the plan for a commission to pass upon rents would be advisable.

Suggests 7 to 10 Per Cent.

Mr. Warren told the committee that in his opinion owners of real estate, dwellings and apartment houses should be permitted to make from 7 to 10 per cent on their investment. He said that the prevailing rate on money invested was 6 per cent, and that in order to encourage building it was necessary to allow a little more than 6 per cent. He said, too, that owing to the fact that leases are made for a year or more, and it is impossible to foresee all the repairs and improvements which may have to be made by the owner of the property before the lease runs out, it is necessary to permit a margin of profit that will make it possible to care for these repairs and still leave the owner a fair profit.

Mr. Russell said that he thought owners of real estate should be entitled to make a minimum of 6 per cent on their investment and a maximum of 15 per cent. He said that each case would have to be considered on its merits.

Mr. Warren also told the committee that the fullest kind of discretion should be allowed the rent commission or administrator to deal with individual cases and that Congress

MUTT AND JEFF—This Half-Pint of "Medicine" Hasn't Got a Chance, Not a Chance.



should avoid laying a hard and fixed rule, because different cases required different treatment.

Might Be Model for States.

Senator Ball in outlining the plan for a rent commission—and this law, if finally adopted, may be regarded as a model for the states which desire to deal with the rents problem—declared that all four of the rent commissioners proposed should be residents of the District of Columbia, so that they would be familiar with conditions here.

In the selection of the commission Senator Ball proposed that one commissioner should be appointed by the President, a second should be appointed from a list of five men submitted to the President by the Real Estate Brokers' Association, and the third should be chosen from a list of five to be presented by the Federation of Citizens' Associations. The District assessor would be the fourth member of the commission ex officio.

This commission would be empowered to administer the rents law, allowing net return on investment in real estate of from 7 to 10 per cent. The tenants and the property owners would have the right to appeal to the commission.

Except when the consent of the owners shall be given, the proposed bill would do away with subleasing of property. This matter the commission would be empowered to deal with.

More Profiteering Feared.

Chairman Ball declared during the hearing that in his opinion some legislation was needed, and that if it was not forthcoming, there would be a great deal of profiteering in rents here, particularly after the Sausbury resolution expires. He made it clear, however, that the committee was anxious not to discourage building, and that any proposition it put forward would take that into consideration.

Chairman Ball suggested that it might be advantageous to place the housing corporation in charge of the erection of some apartment houses here to help relieve the housing situation. Mr. Warren promptly frowned on such a plan, declaring that the housing corporation had been a great failure in its work here. He said that it had caused an enormous increase in the cost of labor for construction, by adopting the cost-plus plan of building. The high wages paid by the corporation had entirely demoralized the labor market and prevented private persons and concerns from attempting building operations under such conditions.

The witness suggested that if the government is going to use its funds to aid in the situation, it would be better for

the government to lend money to private individuals and owners to erect dwellings and to have the money paid back to the government by the borrowers. He said such loans were not absolutely necessary to meet the situation, however.

Says Apartments Need More.

Both Mr. Warren and Mr. Russell insisted that owners of houses could be content with 6 or 7 per cent net return, but that in the case of apartment houses it was only fair to figure on a larger net return, since the costs of maintenance and operation were much greater than in the case of houses.

Mr. Warren expressed the opinion that no apartment houses in Washington today are making over 8 per cent on the investment and that some are not paying as much as 6 per cent.

"Building must be stimulated to obtain relief from the present housing situation here," said Mr. Warren. "If you are going to regulate rents, you must do it through a rent administrator. You cannot deal with this problem with an absolute law, or you will work injustices to many persons. If such a law had been enacted last year we probably would have been 50 per cent better off in the matter of housing the people than we are today."

Discusses Sausbury Act.

Mr. Warren said he had predicted that the Sausbury resolution would not stop profiteering, and that it had not stopped either profiteering or evictions. He said that owners of property had profiteered in the excessive prices which they asked for property when they sold it, and that many evictions had been accomplished through the sale of dwellings.

Mr. Warren offered the co-operation of the real estate brokers in the drafting of legislation for a rent commission or rent administrator. He said that last year the association had endorsed the proposal of a law for a rent administrator.

While discussing the rents situation, Mr. Warren touched upon the wages paid to a very large percentage of the population of Washington—the government employees—declaring that they

had failed to increase materially with the increased cost of living and the increased wages of persons working in private pursuits.

Mr. Russell testified that he had owned the Newport apartment house for seventeen months, that it had cost him \$50,000 and that his net return on

the investment during that time had been \$23, or less than 2 per cent on his investment.

"Accused of Profiteering."

The witness said that he had been accused of profiteering by Representative

Howard of Georgia, during a debate on the floor of the House. He said that the figures he had presented to the committee were a sufficient answer to this accusation. He admitted, however, that in the case of an apartment which had become vacant he increased the rent to the incoming tenant from

\$26 a month to \$75. He said that he had requested his tenants to pay an increase of 10 per cent last year, and that some of them had done so, while still others availed themselves of the Sausbury resolution and did not make the increase. Mr. Russell read to the committee a list of houses which he

owns and rents, and insisted that the rents had not been increased in any of them.

"Yet I am classed as a profiteer by Representative Howard," he said. "He also charged that I evicted a tenant. The charge is false, for the tenant moved voluntarily."

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